

B.R.A.D. Newsletter

Be Responsible About Drinking, Inc. • Winter 2007

Dilemma Dealing with Alcohol-Related Medical Emergencies

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Why a Dilemma When Dealing With Alcohol-Related Medical Emergencies



Even though most people drink responsibly, alcohol misuse is all too common. Alcohol contributes to 85,000 deaths annually, making it the third leading cause of preventable mortality in the United States.¹ Amongst college students, alcohol consumption is linked to at least 1,400 student deaths and 500,000 unintentional injuries each year.² In addition to the health and safety concerns related to collegiate alcohol use is the debate on underage drinking. Consumption by young people under the age of 21 is more common than not, according to the most recent Monitoring the Future Report.³ Many communities struggle with how to properly address underage drinking.

Education, policy and legislation initiatives have all been enacted. Most underage drinking campaigns only address legal concerns with minors consuming alcohol. Not many campaigns address the health and safety issues related to underage drinking. In particular, too few educational campaigns have systematically targeted underage student's dilemma

¹ JAMA, March 10, 2004, (291) 10, 1238-1245.
www.csdp.org/research/1238.pdf

² The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Addiction, *Alcohol Alert*, 58: 1-4. 2002.

³ www.monitoringthefuture.org

regarding the decision to call for an ambulance when symptoms of alcohol poisoning arise in a fellow student. *Although failure to seek medical assistance in cases of alcohol poisoning can lead to fatal outcomes, evidence suggests that the threat of legal consequences resulting from the enforcement of the minimum drinking age or other law or policy violations influences students decision to not call emergency medical services.*⁴

"The majority of medical emergencies seen in college students in the emergency room (ER) are alcohol related," said Sorabh Khandelwal, an emergency medicine physician at the Ohio State University Medical Center. Another Midwest university of similar size speculated that they transport at least 30 students a month to the ER because of suspected alcohol overdose and that most transported students are underage.

- Khandelwal said some students drink too much over a short amount of time and pass out. They can inadvertently choke on their vomit and stop breathing. He encourages students to get immediate medical attention when someone passes out so they can be monitored by emergency room staff.⁵

In the event of alcohol poisoning, these signs and symptoms will most likely be accompanied by a strong odor of alcohol. While these are obvious signs of

⁴ D. Lewis & T. Marchell, *The International Journal of Drug Policy*, "Safety first: A medical amnesty approach to alcohol poisoning at a U.S. university," 2/7/06.

⁵ S. Twitty, *The Lantern* at Ohio State University, "Alcohol Factor in Collegiate ER Visits," 10/31/00. www.thelantern.com

alcohol poisoning, the list is certainly not all inclusive. Alcohol poisoning results from the rapid ingestion of large quantities of alcohol, which overwhelms the liver's ability to process the alcohol and depresses vital functions. This can lead to a coma and even death.

Campuses are struggling to create and enforce policies that validate the choice to call for medical assistance when alcohol is involved. Underage drinking complicates student's decision to seek medical assistance. Quite often an ambulance is accompanied by the police.

John Hopkins University (JHU) students called attention to the ambiguity regarding how to handle alcohol poisoning, particularly as it relates to underage drinkers.⁶ While the Greek system is often told by their national headquarters to take people to the hospital when they are concerned, students reported that the University did not have a formal policy on how such situations should be handled. Freshmen seem even less informed of policies and procedures regarding alcohol misuse and what to do if an individual is sick.

"I know that I'm expected to do whatever I can to ensure the safety and health of guests at my party. I also understand that I can/will be held liable for the student's safety. What specifically that means, I'm not sure on," said Aaron Landgraf, the President of the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity at JHU.

When alcohol is present, students may be reluctant to call for medical assistance because of potential legal consequences. Some students reported fearing that 1) they would be held responsible for an individual who consumed too much alcohol, 2) the person in need of assistance would face legal consequences or that 3) the hosting organization would be prosecuted. This is complicated by the fact that a student may arrive at a venue already intoxicated. All of this acts as a counter incentive to getting help for an individual in a state of need.

In order to increase the likelihood that students would call for an ambulance in a case of suspected alcohol poisoning, some college communities are

⁶ S. Korn & L. Peralta, *The JHU Newsletter*, "Students unclear on alcohol use policies: ambiguity remains in underage drinking rules," 9/30/05.

adopting "Good Samaritan" or medical amnesty policies that address the legal consequences for students involved in medical emergencies. Cornell University evaluated its Medical Amnesty Protocol and was encouraged to see consecutive increases in alcohol-related calls for assistance to emergency medical services during the two year study period.⁴ Amnesty policies are not going to work in your community if there is not buy in from all relevant stakeholders: law enforcement, city council, university staff and faculty, etc.

What Can Our Community Do?

If you are a school administrator or health profession and want to address underage drinking and the fear of calling for medical assistance, you will want to establish a program where you monitor your successes and challenges. Elements involved in developing, maintaining and evaluating evidence based programming are:⁷

- Determining the prevalence of the problem in your community
- Identifying the needs and establishing priorities for services in your community
- Forecasting service needs
- Establishing appropriate program resource levels
- Understanding political and social elements that will enhance or hinder your community wide efforts
- Determining if the desired social change is occurring

What Can Students Do?

We recommend becoming familiar with the symptoms of alcohol poisoning so you know when to call for medical assistance. There is a continuum of consequences associated with overdosing on alcohol. They can include: memory loss, brain damage, coma or death. We believe that the health and safety consequences far surpass the legal concerns.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that friends that are familiar with the signs of alcohol poisoning usually call 9-1-1 for a friend that has passed out from too

⁷ From California's Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs Community Indicators of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Risk Report.

much alcohol. But, we also need to also be concerned about individuals who have been separated from their friends and appear to have symptoms of alcohol poisoning.

Be concerned and call 9-1-1, if a person:

- is unconscious or semiconsciousness.
- has slow respiration (breaths) of eight or less per minute or lapses between breaths of more than eight seconds.
- has cold, clammy, pale or bluish skin.

Students can also lobby for policies and programs that address the fear of legal consequences associated with alcohol-related medical emergencies.

From our Mailbox



Mr. & Mrs. McCue,

First of all, I want to tell you how sorry I am to hear of the loss of your son. My son Brian received your birthday card the other day. He will turn 21 on November 22. Since it was sent to our home address, I then sent it to him at Michigan State University (MSU).

I don't usually open mail addressed to my son Brian, but I opened the envelope to see if it was something he needed right away or if it could wait until he came home for Thanksgiving. Naturally, when I read it, tears started coming. Since his 21st birthday has been on my mind, I forwarded the card to him with a little note.

My son wants to go into medicine and is a junior at MSU so I reminded him of how important it was for him not to make a mistake because just one mistake will make the difference of whether he gets into med school and fulfills his dream. He is a smart kid and we haven't had any problems with him drinking, but little reminders don't hurt and hopefully his roommates will act responsibly as well.

I commend you for thinking enough about our kids to send these birthday cards. Your son is very lucky to have caring parents that take the time to do something positive out of something very tragic. Thank you again.

M. Smiley, MSU Parent

I'm a Junior at the University of South Carolina (USC) and wanted to thank you for my birthday card and free pizza gift card. That is so nice that a group for a great cause takes the time to do that. I could be wrong but I figured you all do not get thanked enough for your generosity. So thanks...

B. Rogers, USC

Special note: the gift card is a program of USC not the B.R.A.D. Foundation

Thank you for my birthday card and for your concern. I had an enjoyable and safe 21st birthday.

B. Linberg at the University of California, Irvine



Myths or Fact?

Having the facts helps everyone make better decisions. There are so many myths surrounding alcohol and some could lead to very dangerous decisions. We want to address just a few of the myths and facts concerning alcohol use.

Myth: The best way to sober someone up is to force them to eat down their throat so that the food absorbs the alcohol. Bread is a great way to do this.

Fact: Hold it right there partner! Forcing food down someone's throat is a sure way to have them choke and at this point, your friend's system is depressed. Their involuntary actions like breathing and having a functioning gag reflex are compromised. Forcing food, or educating them to vomit, are horrible ideas.

Myth: OK, the second best way to sober someone up is to give them a cup of coffee, or how about turning the shower on her, or making him jump up and down.

Fact: No seriously, the only thing that will help your friend is time. These other methods may help them wake up, but the alcohol is in their system still. And, a cold shower only serves to further decrease a person's body temperature. A more awake drunk still has compromised judgment and coordination. Remember, your body metabolizes approximately an ounce of alcohol an hour. And, please don't think that forcing yourself/someone else to vomit will help – see above.

Myth: Women can keep up with men drinking.

Fact: Maybe numerically you can match "him" drink for drink. But, it's not that simple of an equation. Ladies, you have far less water in your bodies to absorb alcohol. In addition, you have less of an enzyme that breaks down alcohol than men. So, you drink far less than him and end up

intoxicated faster than he does. Keeping up with the boys is not leveling the playing field for the sexes.

Myth: Most sexual assaults occur because of GHB or something else was put in someone's drink.

Fact: There is no easy way to say this – alcohol alone has been overwhelmingly linked to sexual assaults. Extreme intoxication can make you vulnerable. Watch out for each other.

Myth: My grades are good and my work supervisor is impressed with my work, so it doesn't matter how much I drink.

Fact: Grades and your work ethic are limited indicators of how your life is going. If you vomit or have hangovers, get into fights, have regretted or have had sex under the influence, it does matter how much your drink.

Myth: Memory loss is a normal part of drinking. Passing out and/or blackouts happen to everyone sooner or later.

Fact: We should note that passing out and blackouts are two different things. Passing out could be a life threatening situation associated with alcohol poisoning. A blackout is an amnesia-like period where someone could be fully functional, but later have no memory of their actions or words.

Myth: Hazing the new pledges with drinking is a harmless tradition.

Fact: Forcing or urging someone to drink as a condition of membership or acceptance is a primitive use of power and has been linked to tragic consequences: hospitalization and death. Plus, we are willing to bet there are rules against hazing on your campus.

Sources:

www.goaskalice-cms.org ,
www.umich.edu/wellness/aod/mythandfacts_pr.htm
www.collegedrinkingprevention.gov/OtherAlcoholInformation/factsAboutAlcoholPoisoning.aspx

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS REQUEST

If you are interested in placing an order, we encourage you to do directly from our website at www.brad21.org/request_literature.html.



| Item | Prices |
|---|-------------|
| Birthday card | \$.18 each |
| Alcohol poisoning wallet card | \$.15 each |
| Alcohol poisoning magnet | \$.30 each |
| Organizational brochure | \$.10 each |
| Alcohol poisoning information sheet | \$.05 each |
| Alcohol poisoning poster | \$5.00 each |
| Alcohol awareness CD with vignettes and facilitator guide | \$100.00 |

MISSION OF B.R.A.D. FOUNDATION

To educate young adults and their parents as to the effects and consequences of alcohol use and abuse. Our educational materials and presentations focus on the signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning and encourage responsible use of alcohol.

HISTORY OF B.R.A.D. FOUNDATION

Be Responsible About Drinking, Inc. (The B.R.A.D. Foundation) was founded on February 2, 1999 by the family and friends of Bradley McCue, a Michigan State University junior who died of alcohol poisoning on November 5, 1998, his 21st birthday. The Foundation is now in its seventh year. We want to thank you and the numerous universities, organizations and proactive individuals that have supported our mission. We could not have done this without you.

DONATE TO THE FOUNDATION



The B.R.A.D. Foundation has relied on the generous donations of friends and advocates of the organization's educational goals and activities. The continuation and scope of our projects is dependent on the donations received. You can

find information about making donations at http://www.brad21.org/make_a_donation.html

Be Responsible About Drinking, Inc. (B.R.A.D.) is a Michigan nonprofit corporation. The organization has been approved by the Internal Revenue Service for tax deductible status under Section 501(c)(3).